POLYTHEISM IN EARLY ISRAEL

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Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version updated edition.

Gen 11:28 indicates that Abraham (then called Abram) was born in “Ur of the Chaldeans.” Ur was in Mesopotamia (probably south of modern Baghdad, in the center of Iraq), between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

Gen 11:31 says that Abraham’s father intended to take Abraham, Sarai (Abraham’s wife, later called Sarah), and Lot (Abraham’s nephew, 11:27) to Canaan (present-day northern Israel). But he settled halfway there, in Haran. Haran was on the upper Euphrates, near the apex of the Fertile Crescent (present-day southeast Turkey). Later, at age 75, Abraham, with Sarah and Lot, left Haran (12:4) and settled in Canaan. Abraham settled in the hill country, and Lot in the plain of the Jordan River (13:12).

So Abraham spent his first 75 years in Mesopotamian culture. Mesopotamian religion was polytheistic. Did Abraham believe in the religion of his surrounding culture, or was he monotheistic? We can’t be sure. At any rate, in Gen 12:1, God says to Abram, “Go from your country [around Haran] and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you [Canaan].” From that point on, Abraham only interacts with God; so he seems to be monotheistic by then.

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One of the clearest examples of early Israelite polytheism is the story of Jacob and Rachel in Gen 29-31.

Jacob (Abraham’s grandson) leaves Canaan (later called Israel) and goes to Aram (north of Israel, present-day Syria), where he agrees to work for Laban for seven years to earn the hand of Laban’s daughter Rachel. (Laban is Abraham’s grandnephew, the grandchild of Abraham’s brother Nahor.) But Laban substitutes his older daughter, Leah, at the wedding and makes Jacob work for him another seven years to earn Rachel. Even after the second wedding, Laban cheats Jacob by giving him less than he deserves as wages. So Jacob and his wives surreptitiously leave Aram. And, we are told (31:19), “Rachel stole her father’s household gods.”

Laban chases Jacob and catches up to him in the countryside. Laban asks (31:30), “why did you steal my gods?” Jacob answers (31:32), “anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live.” Obviously, “Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods” (31:32).

But Rachel is clever (31:34-35): “Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel’s saddle and sat on them. Laban felt all about in the tent but did not find them. And she said to her father, “Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me.” So he searched but did not find the household gods.” Thus Rachel saves the day by feigning menstruation, since Laban could not touch a menstruating woman. (Lev 15:19, “When a woman has a discharge of blood that is a menstrual discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening.”)

Laban and Jacob come to an agreement (a “covenant,” 31:44) not to harm each other in future. Laban says (31:49), “The Lord [Hebrew *Yahweh*] watch between you and me.” He also says (31:53), “May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor judge between us.” The same verse concludes, “So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac . . .” Then they go their separate ways.

Notice that Gen 31:49-54 contain four terms for deity: “Yahweh,” “the God of Abraham,” “the God of Nahor,” and “the Fear of Isaac.” We assume that these are synonyms, all referring to the one God of the Old Testament. But that may not have been the case, since—as the story of the household gods in Gen 31 shows—the Israelites in the patriarchal period may still have been polytheistic. “The God of Abraham,” “the God of Nahor,” and “the Fear of Isaac” are all instances of “the God of the father.”

I don’t think we can say conclusively whether Jacob was polytheistic or exclusively monotheistic. But it seems to me that the evidence inclines toward polytheistic.

After the patriarchal period, the Israelites seem to have arrived at an intermediate position in between polytheism and monotheism: they worshiped only one God but did not deny the existence of other gods. (This intermediate position is called henotheism.) For example, in the 10 Commandments God says, “you shall have no other gods before me.” That could be an acknowledgement that other gods exist. Or it could be an acknowledgement that people believed in other gods and God was saying to put aside that nonsense.

Scholars believe that three concepts of God—”the God of the father,” “El,” and “Yahweh”—syncretized to become the God of the Old Testament. The four terms for deity in 31:49-53 illustrate two of the three concepts: “Yahweh” and “the God of the father.”

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What distinguishes an idol from just a statue is that an idol makes present a deity. So the golden calf was a manifestation of a god.

The question is: which god? The calf could have represented Yahweh—in which case God’s objection to it was not that the Israelites were worshiping another god beside him but that they were violating the prohibition (enunciated in the Ten Commandments) against graven images. But more likely, the calf represented another god. Perhaps the other god was the Apis Bull, worshiped in Egypt as the son of the god Hathor. Or perhaps it was ´El, the supreme god of the Canaanite pantheon (who was symbolized as a bull). You will recall my claim that the God of Old Testament is likely a syncretism of three gods: the God of the father, ´El, and Yahweh. See the attachment.

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Before we leave the topic of polytheism in Israel in the patriarchal period (c. 1850-1250), let me mention some evidence for early Israelite polytheism that is not in the Old Testament.

In the far south of Israel, as one approaches the Red Sea, the ruins of a rectangular building (15 × 25 meters) sit atop a steep hill. The site is known as “Kuntillet `Ajrud” (“the solitary hill of the water wells”). It dates to c. 850-750. It was excavated in 1975-1976.

Among the ruins was found a pithos (a large clay storage vessel for liquid or grain, rather like a present-day barrel or cask). On the pithos is an inscription and a picture. The inscription reads, “Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah.” The picture below the inscription shows, in addition to a cow and a calf, two standing males and a seated female.



The picture and inscription are important as evidence of polytheism in Israel, even into the 800s-700s. Asherah, after all, was the consort of the high god Anu in Sumerian religion and the consort of the high god ´El in Canaanite religion. That she is “Yahweh[´s] Asherah” suggests that at least some of the Israelites (those who worshiped at Kuntillet `Ajrud, at least) also worshiped the goddess Asherah as the consort of their high God.

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The theory that the Jews learned monotheism from the Egyptians is a fairly common one. Akhenaten’s reform, which eliminated all gods but Aten, occurred during his reign, c. 1353-1336; and Moses and the exodus are usually dated around 1240. But *Wikipedia* says concerning Akhenaten: “The views of Egyptologists differ as to whether the religious policy was absolutely monotheistic, or whether it was monolatry, syncretistic, or henotheistic.”

From the 1400s on, Egyptian records refer to a people living in what later became Israel; they were known as the “Shasu.” An Egyptian text that mentions the Shasu and dates from the reign of Amenhotep III (Akhenaten’s predecessor) refers to “Yahu.” “Yahu” seems to be the name of a place, but the word is very similar to “Yahweh.”

About the Shasu, *Wikipedia* says:

[Egyptologist] Donald B. Redford has argued that the earliest Israelites, semi-nomadic highlanders in central Canaan mentioned on the Merneptah Stele at the end of the 13th century BCE, are to be identified as a Shasu enclave. Since later Biblical tradition portrays Yahweh “coming forth from Se`ir” [Deut 33:2; Judg 5:4], the Shasu, originally from Moab and northern Edom/Seʿir, went on to form one major element in the amalgam that would constitute the “Israel” which later established the Kingdom of Israel.